MARYLAND HEALTH CARE COMMISSION

4160 PATTERSON AVENUE – BALTIMORE, MARYLAND 21215
TELEPHONE: 410-764-3460   FAX: 410-358-1236

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Contact: Bruce Kozlowski

443-610-0406

New Web Portal Helps Maryland's Small Businesses Choose Employee Health Care

VIRTUAL COMPARE simplifies shopping for health insurance plans

Baltimore, MD (May 3, 2011) - On May 3rd the Maryland Health Care Commission will launch a new web portal to help small business owners choose a group health plan for their employees. The web portal, known as VIRTUAL COMPARE, provides information about plans available to small employers in Maryland, allowing a side-by-side comparison of benefits, premiums, and out of pocket costs. The portal also includes guidance about choosing health insurance; information about federal tax credits and state subsidies for small, low wage companies; and assistance in finding an insurance broker to apply for coverage.

"VIRTUAL COMPARE is an important piece of our commitment to transparency, assuring that information about the quality and cost of health plans and providers is available to the public," said Marilyn Moon, Chair of the Health Care Commission.

VIRTUAL COMPARE includes both standard and high-deductible versions of HMO and PPO plans. For each plan category, the web portal provides information about the base plan, the two most frequently sold base plans with riders, and two additional benefit designs selected by the carrier.

The web portal arose from 2009 legislation sponsored by Senate Majority Leader Rob Garagiola. The legislation requires benefit and premium comparisons of health benefit plans issued in the small group market. Employers with up to 50 full time employees are eligible; self-employed individuals are not.

"Small businesses face real challenges choosing health insurance for their employees," said Senator Rob Garagiola. "I think they will appreciate a web portal that allows side by side comparisons of premiums, benefits, deductibles and out-of-pocket costs for plans in the small group market."

The web portal will allow the user to compare up to four health plans at a time. Since different plan features are important to different employers, the site includes a variety of sort functions, such as the lowest premium, ideal deductible, or the preferred delivery system. The employer can also choose to view only those products offered by one of the five largest carriers participating in Maryland's small group market.

VIRTUAL COMPARE provides estimated premiums and does not accept applications for coverage. Employers who want additional information or want to apply can contact the carriers directly, or can use the services of a health insurance broker. Employers who do not have an existing relationship with a broker will find information about brokers in their area by clicking on the "Find a Broker" button on VIRTUAL COMPARE. To be listed on VIRTUAL COMPARE, brokers must register using the "Broker Registration" link on the portal. To date, more than 600 brokers have pre-registered on VIRTUAL COMPARE.

VIRTUAL COMPARE also provides a wealth of additional information to help employers as they consider their purchase of a group health plan. Consumer Guides to Health Insurance for Small Employers provide advice to guide employers. A link to the IRS website will help small, lower wage employers determine their eligibility for a federal tax credit that recently became available through federal health reform. The site also includes information on the Health Insurance Partnership, Maryland's premium subsidy program for smaller, lower wage businesses who have not been offering health care benefits, and health plan quality and performance reports that compare the quality of services offered by each carrier.

The Commission awarded a competitive contract to Benefitfocus to design and develop VIRTUAL COMPARE.

To access the VIRTUAL COMPARE web portal go to:
http://mhcc.maryland.gov/virtualcompare.